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Hassan Saab



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TURKEY- ISTANBUL

Bahçelievler, Yenibosna Mh 29 Ekim Cad. No: 7 A2 Blok 3. Plaza D: 64  
Tel/Fax: +90 212 227 2262 E-Mail: [info@eis-eg.org](mailto:info@eis-eg.org)

## Situation of the Egyptian-Syrian Relations (2012-2021)

Hassan Saab

Egypt and Syria are two major Arab and regional powers, whether with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, or to the inter-Arab issues and affairs. In this context, it is significant to refer to many factors such as the geopolitical location, the natural and human resources, the direct adjacency with Israel, and others, which make the decisive influence of the two countries on regional developments and transformations unignorable, whether in peace or war.

Historical and cultural ties as well as the distinguished political, economic, social and cultural relations strongly link the two countries.

The establishment of the United Arab Republic in 1958, Tripartite Arab Federation - between Egypt, Syria and Iraq in 1963 (the April 1963 Charter), and the Federation of Arab Republics agreement signed in Benghazi in April 1971 (between Egypt, Syria and Libya) - all of them were only examples of the historical bond between Egypt and Syria, and evidence of the strength of relations between the two countries.

Although all these unification attempts did not succeed, they confirm the importance of the Egyptian-Syrian relationship in the face of their common challenges on the regional and international arenas<sup>1</sup>.

The positive cooperation between the two countries reached its climax with the outbreak of the Sixth of October War of 1973 against Israel and achievement of a major Arab military victory after the 1967 setback (which had resulted in Israel's occupation of the Sinai from Egypt and the Golan Heights from Syria).

Then, relations returned to zero point again, amid contradiction in Damascus and Cairo's political views on the peaceful settlement with Israel, especially after Egypt signed separate peace accords with Israel in September 1978 (known as Camp David Accords), which had resulted in severing the diplomatic relations between the two countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Egyptian-Syrian Relations, State Information Service, Egypt, 30 June 2010, [link](#)

After restoration of diplomatic ties between Cairo and Damascus in late 1989, their relations unprecedentedly improved, amid major political and economic cooperation between them.

## Egyptian-Syrian relations under Morsi

During the rule of the late Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, which followed a massive popular revolution against Hosni Mubarak in January 2011, Morsi, who had won the presidential election in 2012, the first elections after Mubarak's overthrow, announced his support for the popular revolution against the Syrian regime and condemned Bashar Al-Assad's practices against the Syrian people revolting against the Syrian regime.

In a press conference that Morsi held with President of the European Commission José Barroso, during Morsi's first visit to Europe after he had become president of Egypt, Morsi said that he and EU leaders were "determined" on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's departure.

The two sides stressed the need to change the Assad regime, where [Barroso](#) said: "We are adamant that Assad should go," adding, "There is no room for Assad in Syria. A President that kills his own people simply does not deserve to be President of a country." For his part, Morsi confirmed this, saying: "This is completely agreed upon. This is our common opinion. There is no place for a President who is killing his own people."<sup>2</sup>.

Less than a year later, Morsi said in a speech at a rally in Cairo Stadium titled "in support of Syria" that Egypt "has decided to completely sever relations with the current regime in Syria, close the regime's embassy in Cairo, and withdraw the Egyptian Chargé d'Affairs from Damascus." He stressed that his country has started contacts with Arab and Islamic countries "to hold an emergency summit to support" the Syrian people.

Morsi also called on the UN Security Council to "impose a no-fly zone" over Syria. He stressed that "there is no room or place" for the Assad regime in Syria in the future, considering that the regime has committed "crimes against humanity"<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Morsi: We are determined that Assad should leave, Sky News Arabia, 13 September 2012, [link](#).

<sup>3</sup> Morsi announces the severance of diplomatic relations with Syria and the closure of its embassy in Cairo, France 24, 15 June 2013, [link](#)

But Morsi's rule did not last long, as he was overthrown only a year later by the army led by then-Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. On 8 June 2014, after Sisi officially assumed power following a hastily held presidential election, Sisi announced a partial restoration of relations with Syria, taking the side of the "Syrian army" facing "militant groups", in complete contradiction to Morsi's previous positions.

Reuters had quoted Egyptian officers as saying that the army's position had changed from the era of late President Morsi against the backdrop of his stances on the Syrian revolution, as well as his decision to sever ties with Bashar al-Assad's regime<sup>4</sup>.

### Egyptian-Syrian relations under Sisi

On his first visit to the United States in September 2014, Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi assured the media delegation that accompanied him, that Syria is considered Egypt's strategic depth. He called for respect for the Syrian territorial integrity, and stressed the link between Egyptian national security and the unity of the Syrian state warning against dividing or fragmenting it, regardless of the regime that rules it.

Major General Mohamed Al-Ghabari, former director of the National Defense College and advisor to Nasser Higher Military Academy and former Military Police Director, confirmed that the link between the two countries - given that Syria is considered Egypt's strategic depth - stems in the first place from the existence of a mutual defense agreement between the two countries, and that this agreement is more important than the Camp David Accords with Israel.

Al-Ghabari made it clear that it is in Egypt's interest to ensure maintaining the existence of an independent and cohesive Syrian state, regardless of its internal political conflicts or the regime that leads it<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Heikal reveals and confirms... Sisi opposed Morsi in severing ties with Bashar's regime, Zaman Alwasl website, 5 July 2013, [link](#)

<sup>5</sup> Ismail Goma'a, "Syria.. Egypt's strategic depth, Al-Ahram daily website, no publishing date, [link](#)

With the continued civil war in Syria without a decisive transformation, Cairo has begun talking about the importance of finding a political solution to the Syrian crisis, and not compromising what it called the "Syrian National Army."

In late 2016, Bashar al-Assad confirmed, in press statements, that Syrian-Egyptian relations had begun to improve, explaining that these relations "are currently limited to security cooperation". He also acknowledged the support his army receives from the Egyptian army<sup>6</sup>.

In recent years, after the Syrian army succeeded in retaking large areas of Syrian territory, with the support of its Russian and Iranian allies, an Arab and regional communication movement have begun towards the Assad regime, at the diplomatic, security or economic levels. In late April 2020, a telephone conversation took place between Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and the UN Special Envoy for Syria Mr. Geir Pedersen, during which the former confirmed that "Egypt intends to return Syria to its normal position on the regional and international arenas."

In early 2017, Shoukry announced that the international community must recognize that the military conflict is not the right way to solve the crisis in Syria. "This conflict will not end in the presence of terrorist organizations that have penetrated the Syrian arena, and will continue to work to destabilize Syria, if there is no credibility in the international community's efforts to eradicate them completely."

On November 22 of the same year, Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi said that his country supports the Syrian army in the face of extremist elements.

Within the framework of several unofficially announced Syrian-Egyptian meetings that preceded the partial revival of relations between Egypt and Syria, the Lebanese [Al-Akhbar](#) newspaper in September 2015 reported that a meeting was held in late August between Major General Ali Mamlouk, the head of the Syrian National Security Bureau and Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi in Cairo. The newspaper pointed out that in late August 2015, Major General Mamlouk went to Cairo, in an undeclared visit, and met with Sisi and a number of senior officials in the Egyptian army, intelligence and security. The sources also

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<sup>6</sup> Egypt explains reasons for the delay in restoration of relations with the Assad regime, Syria TV website, 27 January 2021, [link](#)

said that Mamlouk discussed with Egyptian leaders means of security cooperation between the two countries in the face of terrorism, and the prospects for a political solution to the Syrian crisis.

The sources also indicated that it was agreed that Egypt should play a greater role in the Syrian crisis, given that Syria constitutes a strategic depth linked to Egyptian national security, which was confirmed by Egyptian officials to Mamlouk, according to the Lebanese newspaper.

In a remarkable political and security development, Egypt succeeded in August 2017 in concluding two agreements to calm down the situation in Syria, with the consent of the conflicting parties and the acceptance of international actors in the crisis.

Egypt succeeded in reaching a truce agreement in Eastern Ghouta and then another truce agreement north of Homs, in what appears to be Egypt's determined attempts to expand its role in the Syrian crisis, in coordination with regional and international powers.

Ahmed al-Jarba, head of the opposition Syria's Tomorrow movement, based in Cairo, believes that Egypt is an acceptable party to both sides of the conflict in Syria. He added, "The choice of Egypt as a sponsor of the two cease-fire agreements in Eastern Ghouta and the northern countryside of Homs, was a natural result of its active role in the Syrian issue... Egypt is also the country that is most committed to resolving the Syrian crisis by peaceful means..." he said.

Since Sisi came to power in 2014, he has maintained contacts between Egypt and Syria without interruption. According to some diplomatic sources, Egypt has recently contacted Bashar al-Assad in an effort to help resolve the political crisis, as a prelude to returning Syria to the Arab embrace, and thus restoration of its seat in the Arab League.

In late January 2021, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry stated before Parliament that the restoration of the Egyptian-Syrian relations is somewhat complicated, but he stressed his aspiration for Syria to return to its due position.

In this context, Egyptian diplomatic sources revealed that there were contacts between Cairo and Moscow. During the contacts, Russian officials raised the issue of Syria's return to membership of the Arab League. The sources indicated that Egypt confirmed, during the contacts, its keenness to return Syria to the Arab League. But at the same time, Cairo highlighted its inability to resolve the issue on

its own, as it is mainly related to the US sanctions imposed on Bashar al-Assad's regime, and that a number of Arab countries reject Syria's return to the Arab League.

The sources pointed out that Egypt informed Russia that it had already proposed, through several means, whether directly and through intermediaries, to the new US administration the need to repeal the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, known as "Caesar Act", that entered into force in June 2020, including imposition of severe sanctions on the Syrian regime.

In fact, the first ministerial meeting of its kind in 10 years between Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and his Syrian counterpart, Faisal Miqdad, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meetings in New York, in September 2021, raised questions about the implications and repercussions of the sudden shift in Cairo's position from implicit support for the Syrian regime to explicit support for the Syrian regime, in light of the regional transformations and the intertwining attitudes of various international and regional powers in this crisis since 2011.

Egypt's official position in support of the Syrian revolution and the severing of diplomatic relations with the Assad regime under Morsi has changed since the summer of 2013.

In his comments one day after meeting with Miqdad, Shoukry stressed that this meeting was important "after the lull in the military battles, to explore the steps that would lead to preserving the capabilities of the Syrian people, getting out of the crisis and restoring Syria as an active party in the Arab framework."

Regarding the implications and dimensions of the meeting between Shoukry and Miqdad, Mohamed Al-Zawawi, an Egyptian academic and researcher in political science, believes that "it appears to be an exploratory meeting from Cairo to inquire about the latest developments in the situation in Syria, and the arrangements that are currently being prepared for, mainly by Russia, in order to enter a transitional period."

In statements to Al-Jazeera Net website, Al-Zawawi said that there is almost Arab unanimity to return Syria to the Arab League. With regard to the Egyptian rapprochement with the Syrian regime and its dimensions on Cairo's moves towards Jordan and Iraq, Al-Zawawi said that Egypt is trying to establish a new regional circle after the collapse of the Arab circle, where rapprochement with Iraq, Jordan

and Syria would enhance Cairo's economic standing, while expanding the economic cooperation to political and strategic cooperation in the future.

Al-Zawawi pointed out that Syria is an important element in that strategy, given its historical weight and its place in the Egyptian military strategy.

Also, Dr. Hassan Nafaa, an academic and political analyst, pointed out that contacts between the Egyptian regime and its Syrian counterpart have been going on for several years. In statements to Al Jazeera Net, Nafaa said that Egypt is extremely interested in what is going on in Syria, considering it as a result of a major sabotage and conspiracy in which Arab countries and others participated; therefore, it is against the idea of removing Bashar al-Assad from power.

Regarding the return of Syria to the Arab League, Nafaa ruled out that Egypt would be enthusiastic in adopting a campaign to return the Arab League seat to the Syrian government under al-Assad, despite its official support for the issue, due to keenness on maintaining good relations with Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf states that reject the matter<sup>7</sup>.

### Obstacles facing restoration of relations

There are several obstacles to restoring relations between Egypt and Syria to normal, including:

- **First**, the American veto, whether declared and undeclared, against ending the isolation of the Syrian regime, that is strongly related to the enemies of the United States in the region, Iran and its allies.
- **Second**, the Israeli opposition, as the Camp David Accords have linked the Egyptian regime and the Israeli entity for decades, where the latter does not favor the return of relations between Egypt and Syria to normal, for well-known strategic, security, political and economic motives.

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<sup>7</sup> Mahmoud Sami, "The first of its kind since the Syrian revolution.. What is behind the meeting of Shoukry and Miqdad? Al Jazeera Net, 29 September 2021, [link](#)



- **Third**, the Saudi veto, as it is no longer secret that the Gulf countries in general, Saudi Arabia in particular, have a great influence on the political and strategic decision-making circles in Egypt, via the “weapon” of generous financial aid to the Egyptian regime for decades, with the exception of the period of Morsi’s rule that lasted for only one year.
- **Fourth**, internal considerations, as such factors directly relate to the two countries' political, security and economic conditions, in addition to their foreign relations. While Syria is still mired in civil war and internal conflict, the Egyptian regime is facing stifling political, economic and social crises, in addition to the army’s exhaustion in armed confrontation with the militant insurgency in Sinai - all of which obliges the Egyptian regime to get closer to the “enemies” of the Syrian regime.
- **Fifth**, the position of the Egyptian and Syrian regime within two conflicting regional axes, for strategic or non-strategic motives, whether related to the Palestinian issue and the conflict with the Israeli entity, or with regard to the security of the Arab Gulf and sea and water lanes, up to the relationship with Iran and its ally or hostile countries, most notably Saudi Arabia.
- **Sixth**, the two countries' attitude towards the conflict with the Israeli entity, as the two countries' political positions have not changed on this issue, being a strategic issue for the Egyptian and Syrian parties. Egypt will not abandon the Camp David Accords with “Israel”, despite the failure of political and popular normalization with the latter. At the same time, the regime in Syria has not changed its position on the need to conclude collective and balanced peace agreements with “Israel”, given that the individual agreements do not achieve significant gains for the Arab parties, in light of the continued Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and some Syrian and Lebanese lands, up to Israeli normalization with some Gulf and Arab countries, which mainly target Iran, the primary regional ally of the Syrian regime, and the political opponent of the Egyptian regime since the success of the Iranian revolution in 1979.

## Conclusion

Despite all obstacles in the way of a full normalization of relations between the Sisi regime and the Assad regime, a historic shift can still be expected in the course of Egyptian-Syrian relations in the future, with bypassing all or some of these obstacles.

Strategic considerations, including historical, religious, cultural, economic and social ties, necessitate restoration of the Egyptian-Syrian relations to normal, albeit at a minimum level, in order to activate the joint confrontation of the challenges facing the two regimes and peoples, most notably the projects of American and Israeli hegemony, liberation of the Palestinian land and ensuring the return of the Palestinian people In the diaspora to his free independent country.

In parallel, both regimes should address their deep internal crises, where the peoples of the two countries have been suffering for decades of lack of public freedoms, and limited political influence of civil and popular parties, forces, and bodies, in contrast to the escalating influence of the army and security services, which negatively affects policies and orientations and threatens the stability of the two countries in particular, and the security and stability of regional countries in general.

It remains the responsibility of decision makers in Egypt and Syria to make decisive decisions regarding the restoration of normal relations, in the interest of the two brotherly countries and peoples.